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PRESS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
September 19, 2000**

ALIEN SMUGGLER CONVICTED OF SMUGGLING RESULTING IN DEATH

San Diego, California: Gregory A. Vega, United States Attorney for the Southern District of California, announced a guilty verdict today in the case of the United States v. Juan Ramirez-Lopez. Ramirez-Lopez was convicted on all nineteen counts of the indictment, which charged him with alien smuggling resulting in death, alien smuggling for profit, and transportation of undocumented aliens. The indictment was a result of a tragic incident that occurred in March of this year where Ramirez-Lopez was apprehended in the Laguna mountains after leading a group of migrants through a powerful snowstorm resulting in the death of one of the group's members.

According to court record, the defendant entered the United States in the mountains near Tecate, California on March 2, 2000. Ramirez-Lopez, guided approximately 25 undocumented migrants through the Laguna Mountains near Campo, CA. Smugglers often prey upon inadequately prepared migrants, by leading them into treacherous terrain for the sole purpose of financial gain. This trek was between 20 and 25 miles from the border to the Laguna Mountains through the rugged terrain of the East County. The discovery of two snow-covered men walking along Sunrise Highway by a San Diego County road worker spurred the rescue operation. The joint effort included Border Patrol Agents from East County, the Border Patrol Search, Trauma and Rescue Team (BORSTAR), California Highway Patrol, San Diego Sheriff's Office, and the Mount Laguna Fire Department. The humanitarian mission resulted in the rescue of 30 migrants and the unfortunate discovery of three people who died of exposure to the extreme conditions.

In 1998, San Diego Sector Border Patrol launched the Border Safety Initiative (BSI). This initiative was designed to increase safety for agents, our border communities and migrants. San Diego has been very proactive and instrumental in the development of the BSI and has successfully deployed resources throughout the region in continued support of this initiative. This has included hot and cold weather packs, warning signs in hazardous and high traffic areas, public safety announcements and the creation of the Border Search Trauma and Rescue Team (BORSTAR). **-CONTINUED-**

One of the fundamental aspects of the BSI includes identifying high-risk corridors and the smugglers who operate in these areas. This provides for the distribution of the resources, when needed, to create a safer border environment. Additionally, the identification of smugglers is an attempt to enhance prosecution of individuals who continuously endanger the lives of others by guiding them into areas of extreme climate and geography.

United States Attorney Gregory A. Vega commented that, “this prosecution and conviction represents the government’s resolve to aggressively prosecute alien smugglers who recklessly endanger the lives of the undocumented migrants they prey upon.” Juan Ramirez-Lopez is scheduled to appear for a sentencing hearing on Monday December 11, 2000.

Video footage of the March 6, 2000 rescue is available upon request